

# Overcoming Obstacles to Effective Communication (Behavioral Health Clients)



Presented By

Laura M. Wendlandt, Ph.D.  
Mental Health Consultant  
Office of the Public Defender

# ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE FOR MONTANA MENTAL HEALTH LAW ADVOCATES

- *In the Matter of the Mental Health of K.G.F.*, 306 Mont. 1, 29 P. 3d 485 (2001)
- Standards for Representation of a Respondent in a Proceeding for Involuntary Commitment
- See, M.R.P.C., Rules Rule 1.2, 1.4, 1.6
  - especially Rule 1.14 (Client with Diminished Capacity)

# Communication

- What is *communication*?
- What makes communication effective?  
efficient?
- What is the role of semantics?

# Communication is:

- **Verbal AND non-verbal**

- We are judged by what, when, where, how we say and act (including how we look)
- We judge others by what, when, where, how they say and act (including how they look)
- We interpret the message and make inferences (often conclusions) based on our observations and experience with the communication process

# Communication Considerations

- Semantics
- Client characteristics
  - Sx (symptoms)
  - Dx (diagnosis)
  - Other specifics

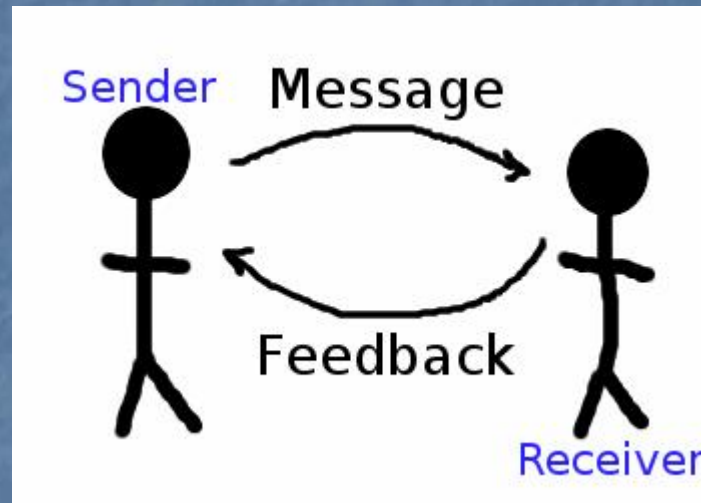
# Feedback Loop

- There are certain socially acceptable ways to communicate
- **Speaker—listener—feedback** and then the listener is the speaker and so forth
- Within the communication feedback loop
  - We have socially acceptable expressions, attentiveness behavior and eye contact
  - We have socially acceptable rules for parameters of the dialogue and subject matter



# Reciprocal Communication

- In theory:

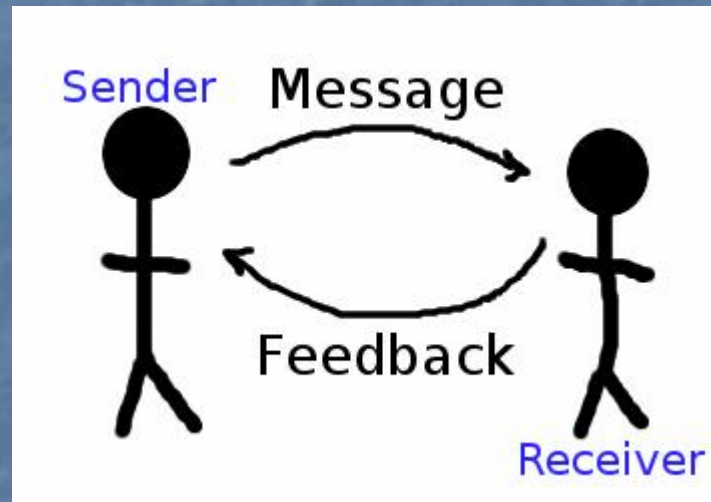


# Reciprocal

## ■ Expected



Feedback



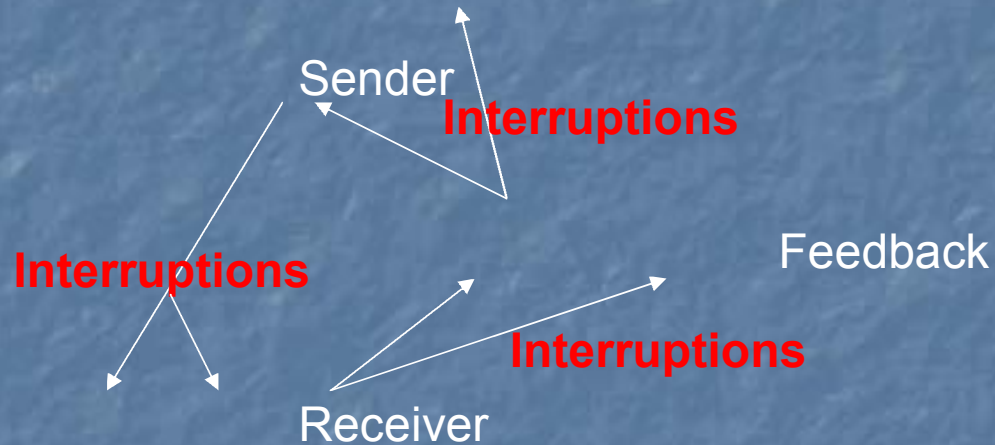


# Client Characteristics

- Clients and diagnoses vary, so do their communication styles
  - Symptoms, Diagnosis, and current Mental Status effect communication
  - Context will be a consideration
    - Situational, environmental, timing, location, etc.
- So, the reciprocal pattern we have come to socially expect....

# Reciprocal??

- Potential problems– Interruptions
  - Internal and external to the client



# Breakdown happens!

- Resistance to change
- Resistance to new information or people
- Natural human tendency when there is:
  - Uncertainty
  - Unfamiliar situations or people
  - The unknown
  - Being forced or feeling pushed into something (or feeling that way)

# Reduce Resistance

- Uncertainty
- Unfamiliarity
- The unknown
- Feeling pushed or forced
- Feeling disregarded
- Inform and explain
- Inform and explain
- Inform and explain
- Gently, calmly, softly inform and explain
- Reflective listening

# Know yourself

- Helping reduce the resistance from the client is important
- Knowing your communication style is essential
  - How you react, respond, use tone and volume
  - Your awareness of preconceived notions



# Practical Skills

- Preconceived notions
- Rapport building
- Be patient
- Word choices
- Check your posturing



# Practical Skills

- What are your **preconceived notions** about mental illness in general?
- What are your preconceived notions about a specific diagnosis?
- What are your preconceived notions about this client?
- What are your preconceived notions about the allegations against your client?
- Self awareness exercise like Johari Windows are enlightening (fyi= last three slides)

# Practical Skills

## ■ Rapport Building

- Meet with the client in the most confidential place possible
- Explain who you are and the reason for your visit
- Ask if this is a good time to talk to them
- Ask if they have any questions before you begin with the formal questioning
- When possible, let the client know you are coming to meet with them in advance of your arrival

# Practical Skills

- **Be patient**

- Stressors increase anxiety which inhibits attention and thought
- This is true for all of us, with various mental illnesses, reality, rationality and logic may be absent or minimally present
- Be aware of your actions, tone of voice so you do not sound confrontational or threatening
  - The client may, however, view it that way no matter what

# Practical Skills

## ■ Word choices

- First and foremost, be respectful of their situation and always treat the client with dignity
- Client's thought patterns may be very concrete
- Clarification may be needed
  - Especially with legal terms or acronyms
  - They may not understand the situation and argue with you about specifics of their arrest for example—do not participate in that argument
  - Think of it this way, you can not rationalize with an irrational person (like when someone is drunk!)



# Practical Skills

- **Word choices**

- Attend to what they are saying
- Show interest by verbal acknowledgements and nodding your head
- Maintain appropriate eye contact
- Use reflective listening skills

# Practical Skills

## ■ Check your posturing

- Non threatening stance and facial expressions
- comfortable open body posture (standing or sitting)
- be cautious of sudden/quick movements
- Standard rule of thumb: position yourself for ease of escape
  - Yet do not “corner” the client
    - Fight or flight response may result
  - More times than not, this is not necessary, however it is important to remember
  - Listen to you own gut and instincts



# Practical Skills

- When in doubt, **CONSULT!**
- [drlaura@mt.gov](mailto:drlaura@mt.gov)